

The Ranch at the Wolverine

A Story of Love and Adventure on Idaho's Plains

By B. M. BOWER

CHARLIE FOX ARRIVES AT THE COVE AND HELPS MARTHY RUN THE PLACE—HE SOON DISCOVERS EVIDENCE OF CATTLE THEFT.

Synopsis.—Marthy and Jase Melike, pioneers, have for twenty years made a home living out of their ranch at the Cove on Wolverine creek in the mountain range country of Idaho. Their neighbors, the MacDonnells, living several miles away, have a daughter, Billy Louise, now about nineteen years old, whom Marthy has secretly helped to educate. At the time the story opens Billy Louise is spending the afternoon with Marthy. A snowstorm comes up, and on her way home the girl meets an interesting stranger, who is invited to stay overnight at the MacDonnell ranch. Ward Warren and Billy Louise become firm friends. Jase dies and Marthy buries his body without aid.

CHAPTER III—Continued.

"You saw nothing, of course. You came from home."

"No, I did not. I got as far as the creek and saw Billy's tracks coming down, so I just sort of trailed along, seeing if I could find a trail. I felt most like talking to you."

"Monnie's daughter" laughed a little and instinctively made a change in the subject.

"I've got to go in and wash the dishes," she said, stepping back from him. "Of course nothing was done in the cabin, and I've been doing a little housecleaning. I guess the dishwasher is hot by this time—if it hasn't all boiled away."

Ward, as a matter of course, tied his horse to the fence and went into the cabin with her. He also asked her to stake him to a dish towel, which she did after a good deal of rummaging. He stood with his hat on the back of his head, a cigarette between his lips, and wiped his face with a handkerchief. He objected strongly to Billy Louise's assertion that she meant to scrub the floor, but when he found her quite obstinate he changed his method without in the least degree yielding his point, though for diplomatic reasons he appeared to yield.

He carried water from the creek and filled the teakettle, the big iron pot and both pans. Then, when Billy Louise had turned her back upon him while she looked in a dark corner for the soap, he suddenly seized her under the arms and lifted her upon the table, and before she had finished her astonished gasping he caught up a pail of water and dashed it over her head and shoulders. Then he grinned at her.

Billy Louise gave a squeal of consternation and then sat absolutely still, staring round-eyed through the doorway. Ward stepped back—even his composure was slightly jarred—and twisted his lips amusedly.

"Hello," he said after a few blank seconds. "You missed one of it, didn't you?" His tone was mildly commiserating. "Will you come in?"

"No-o, thank you, I don't believe I will," the speaker looked in, however, saw Billy Louise perched upon the table and took off his hat. He was well plastered with dirty water that ran down and left streaks of mud behind. "I must have got dark round," he said. "I'm looking for Jase Melike's ranch."

Billy Louise tucked her feet farther under her skirts and continued to stare dumbly. Ward, glancing at her from the corner of his eye, stepped considerably between her and the stranger so that his broad shoulders quite hid her from the man's curious stare.

"You've struck the right place," he said calmly. "This is it." He picked up another pail of water and dashed it upon the floor to rise of the mud. "Is—ah—Mrs. Melike in?" One could not accuse the young man of craning, but he certainly did try to get another glimpse of the person on the table and failed because of Ward.

"She's down in the meadow," Billy Louise murmured.

"She's down in the meadow," Ward repeated to the bewildered young man. "You just go down past the stable and



He Caught Up a Pail of Water and Slashed It on the Floor.

follow on down"—he waved a hand vaguely before he took up the broom again. "You'll find her, all right," he added encouragingly.

"Oh, Ward! That must be Marthy's nephew. What will he think?"

"Does it matter such a deuce of a lot what he thinks? Ward went on with his interrupted scrubbing.

"I'm awfully glad he came, anyway," said Billy Louise. "I won't have to stay all night now. I was going to."

"In that case the young man is welcome as a gold mine. Here they come—be and Mrs. Marthy. You'll have to introduce me. I have never met the lady." Ward hastily returned the mop to its corner, rolled down his sleeves and picked up his gloves. Then he stepped outside and waited beside Billy Louise, looking not in the least like a man who has just wiped a lot of dishes and scrubbed a floor.

The nephew, striding along and shoulders above her, seemed not to resent any little mischance, such as muddy water flung upon him from a broom. He grinned reminiscently as he came up, shook hands with the two of them and did not let his glance dwell too long or too often upon Billy Louise nor too briefly upon Ward.

When Ward went to the stable after Blue half an hour later Charlie Fox went with him. His manner when they were alone was different, not so exuberantly cheerful—more frank and practical.

"Honest, it floored me completely to see what that poor old fellow had been up against down here," he told Warren, stuffing tobacco into a silver rimmed briar pipe while Ward saddled Blue. "I don't know a deuce of a lot about this ranch game, but if that old lady can put it across I guess I can wobble along somehow. Too bad the old man cashed in just now, but Aunt Martha as good as told me he wasn't much force, so maybe I can play a lone hand here as easy as I could have done with him."

Afterward, when Ward thought it over, he remembered gratefully that Charlie Fox had refrained from attempting any discussion of Billy Louise or from asking any questions even remotely personal. He knew enough about men to appreciate the tactful silence of the stranger, and when Billy Louise on the way home predicted that the nephew was going to be a success Ward did not feel like qualifying the verdict.

CHAPTER IV.—The Mystery of the Missing.

WHEN Charlie "ox rode down to the Wolverine a month or so later, then his horse under the shed and came up to the cabin as though he knew of no better place in all the world; when he greeted "monnie" as though she were something else; when he before met a man just like Charlie Fox, though she had known many who were what Ward once called "parlor broke."

It was not until Charlie was leaving that he gave Billy Louise a hint that she had never before met a man just like Charlie Fox, though she had known many who were what Ward once called "parlor broke."

"You know, I hate to mention little women before you meet 'em," he said. "Those pathetic eyes of hers make me ashamed to bother her with a thing. But I am worried, Miss Louise. I came over to ask you if you've seen anything of four calves of ours. I know you ride a good deal through the hills. They disappeared a week ago, and I can't find any trace of them. I've been looking all through the hills, but I can't locate them."

"The bars were all right. It was last Friday, I was in 'em sure. They were here, you see. I was away that night, and Aunt Martha is a little hard of hearing. She wouldn't hear anything unless there were considerable noise."

"The next day she rode over to the Cove and learned some things from Marthy which she had not gleaned from Charlie. She learned that two of the calves were a deep red except for a white, white strip on the neck and white hind feet on the other; that another was spotted on the hindquarters and that the fourth was white, with large, red blotches. She had known cattle all her life. She would know these if she saw them anywhere."

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where, I had just bought them from Seaback, you know. I drove them home, and because they were tired, and so was I, I just left them in that upper meadow as I came down the gorge. I hadn't branded them yet. I know I've made an awful blot of the thing, Miss Louise," he confessed, turning toward her with an honest distress and a self-justifying humility in his eyes that wiped from Billy Louise's mind any incipient tendency toward contempt. "But you see I'm green at this ranch game. And I never saw those calves weren't perfectly safe in there. The fence was new and strong, and the bars are absolutely bars to any stock larger than a rabbit."

"I hate to bother you with this, and I don't want you to think I have come whining for sympathy," he said after a minute of moody silence. "But, seeing they were not branded yet—with our brand—I thought perhaps you had run across them and paid no attention, thinking they belonged to Seaback."

Billy Louise smiled a little to herself. If he had not been quite so "green" at this ranch game, he would have mentioned brands at first as the most important point. Instead of taking the information casually after ten minutes of other less vital details.

"Were they vented?" she asked, suppressing the smile so that it was merely a twitch of the lips which might mean anything.

"Yes, I think they were. That's what you call it when the former owner puts his brand in a different place to show that his ownership has ceased. Isn't it? Seaback puts his brand upside down."

"I know Seaback's vent," Billy Louise cut in. There was no need of letting such a fine fellow display more ignorance on the subject. "And I should have noticed if I had seen four calves vented fresh and not branded. Why in the world didn't you stick your brand on at the same time?" Billy Louise was losing patience with his greenness.

"I didn't have my branding iron with me," Charlie answered humbly. "I have done that before, when I bought those other cows and calves. I—"

"You'd better pack your iron next time," she retorted. "If you can't get a little bunch of calves ten miles without losing them—"

"But you must understand I did. I took them home and turned them into the Cove. I know—I'm an awful chump at this."

"The calves may not be absolutely lost, you know. I lost a big steer last spring and never found him till I was going to sell a few head. Then he turned up, the biggest and fattest one in the bunch. You can't tell."

They got themselves in queer places sometimes. I'll come over tomorrow if I can and take a look at that pasture and all around. And I'll keep a good lookout for the calves."

Many men would have objected to the unconscious patronage of her tone. But Charlie Fox did not, he was interested in the spirit of helpfulness in her words, lifted him out of the small natured class.

"It's awfully good of you," he said. "You know a lot more about the bovine nature than I do, for all I put in every spare minute studying the subject. I'm taking four different stock journals now, Miss Louise. I'll bet I know a lot more about the different strains of various breeds than you do, Miss Louise. But I'm beginning to see that I can't find any trace of them. I've been looking all through the hills, but I can't locate them."

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suppose you could. But they were stolen."

Charlie frowned and glanced up speculatively at the bluff's rim. "Oh, your mountain sheep theory is no good," Billy Louise giggled. "I doubt if a lizard even would try to leave the Cove over the bluff," which certainly was a sweeping statement when you consider a lizard's habits. "A mountain sheep couldn't anyway."

"They're hummers to climb—"

"But calves are not, Mr. Fox. Not like them. You know yourself they were stolen. Why not admit it?"

"Would that do any good—bring them back?" he countered, looking up at her.

"No, but I do hate to see a person deliberately shut his eyes in front of a fact. We may as well admit to ourselves that there is a rustler in the country. Then we can look out for him."

Charlie's eyes had the troubled look. "I hate to think that. Aunt Martha insists that is what we are up against, but—"

"Well, she knows more about it than you do, believe me. If you'll let down the bars, Mr. Fox, I'll hit the trail, and if I don't find anything I'll let you know at once."

When she rode over the bleak upland she caught herself wishing that she might talk the thing over with Ward. He would know just what ought to be done. But winter was coming.

She rode up the long ridge which gave her a wide view of the surrounding hills and stopped Blue, while she stared moodily at the familiar, shadow spotted expanse of high piled ridges, with deep, green valleys and deeper blue hills. And there was a big rooster that bore the brand of Johnson, over on Snake river. Billy Louise knew them all, as a housewife knows her flock of chickens, and if she missed seeing certain leaders in the scattered groups she rode until she found them. Two old cows and one big red steer that seemed always to have a following were bells that tinkled pleasant little sounds in the older thickets along the creek as she passed by.

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